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The transition into adoptive parenthood:

Adoption as a process of continued unsafe uncertainty when family scripts collide

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Abstract

Our prospective study investigated couples' expectations of adoptive parenthood and explored how these changed with their actual experience of parenthood. Six heterosexual couples were interviewed just before placement began and six months after the children had arrived. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyse both sets of interview data. Expectations of adoptive parenthood mostly transformed smoothly into adoption experience for couples but challenges were experienced when family scripts collided and a continued feeling of unsafe uncertainty then prevailed within these newly formed family systems. Family script collision seemed a particular problem for couples adopting sibling pairs. To further professional practice in working with families over the transition to adoptive parenting we suggest that professionals keep in mind a framework that includes: Internal and external world influences on family members, Intergenerational issues, Family scripts, and the Structural challenges of adoption (IIFS).

Keywords: adoption, family systems, family scripts, siblings, transition to parenthood, unsafe uncertainty

Introduction

Professionals who work with families in fostering and adoption services need to recognise the particular relational challenges facing adoptive parents to minimize the possibility of adoption difficulties and disruption (Selwyn, Meakings & Wijedasa, 2015). Understanding the family processes adoptive parents experience may enable the development of more effective adoption support, thus increasing the likelihood of satisfactory and stable adoption placements (Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010). Substantial systemic research has been conducted on new parents' adjustment during the transition to biological parenthood (Lindblom et al. 2014) but much less is known about parental psychological adjustment and family processes during the adoption transition. Our prospective interview study aimed to understand the process of family identity transition experienced by heterosexual couples as their adopted children arrived and settled into their new family.

The Challenges of Adoptive Parenthood

A few publications have offered guidance on the transition to adoptive parenthood to support adoptive parents and professionals in the field. For example, from the reports of parents in their U.K. survey of the factors involved in adoption disruption Selwyn and colleagues wrote a readily accessible book, including helpful chapters on settling into adoptive family life (Selwyn et al., 2015). Likewise the British Association for Adoption and Fostering's widely used training programme "Preparing to Adopt" has included a useful module on learning to live together as an adoptive family based on first-hand accounts of adoptive parents, children and young people (Fursland, 2010). Professionals in adoption work in the U.S. also have written books for prospective adoptive parents and professionals on supporting adoptive families with the ongoing challenge of parenting children who have experienced prior adversity (see for example, Eldridge [2009] and Gray [2007]).

Research on into the effects of the transition into adoptive parenting from the point of view of adoptive parents is aptly summarized by McKay and colleagues who reviewed 11 mixed methods studies that focused on heterosexual couple's adjustment to adoptive parenting and used standardized measures to report on changes in mental health, physical health, and couple relationship satisfaction in the immediate post- adoption period (McKay, Ross & Goldberg, 2010). McKay et al.'s review concluded that post-adoption depression was relatively common. Findings from one longitudinal study indicated that adoptive mothers experienced similar rates of depression six weeks post-adoption to those experienced by biological mothers in the post-partum period (Senecky, Agassi, Inbar, Horesh, Diamond, Bergman and Apter, 2009). However, Senecky and colleagues also noted that the rate of depression in their sample of 39 Israeli women dropped from pre to post adoption as the highest rates of depression were reported by participants two months prior to placement of an internationally adopted child, who was aged between 2 to 25 months old at the time of placement.

Some authors have concluded that adjustment to adoptive parenthood is often less stressful than adjustment to parenthood after birth, especially if the adopted children are young (Ceballo, Lansford, Abbey & Stewart, 2004; Levy-Shiff, Bar & Har-Even, 1990). Ceballo and colleagues suggested that this was because adoptive parents were generally older than birth parents and had learnt more coping responses during their life course. Other researchers have pointed out that adoptive couples also have often been together longer than primiparous mothers and their partners and that couples who adopt often have surmounted relationship stresses associated with infertility (Levy-Shiff et al., 1990). Furthermore, compared with many birth parents, adoptive couples tend to be more financially secure at time of entry into parenthood (Kadushin, 1980).

Nevertheless couples who have waited a long time to become adoptive parents to a much wanted child may minimize some of the difficulties encountered in parenthood, perhaps particularly so when using self-report checklists in quantitative studies (Brodzinsky & Huffman, 1988). Quinton, Rushton, Dance and Mayes (1998) described adoptive parents as experiencing “instant parenthood” (p.156) and queried whether previous studies had fully examined the particular stresses of adoption. Qualitative studies have begun to explore adoptive parents’ experiences. For example, one prospective study of a U.K. sample of 27 adoptive parents highlighted the challenges parents encountered in adopting from their initial application to finally being selected, a process that on average took around two years to complete (Dance & Farmer, 2014). An earlier study of 39 Canadian couples who had adopted a child within the preceding two years likewise concluded that the transition to adoptive parenthood was stressful (Daniluk and Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003). Daniluk and Hurtig-Mitchell identified three main themes in their phenomenological analyses of participants’ interviews: the process of coming to terms with dashed hopes of biological parenthood and deciding to adopt; psychologically surviving the uncertainties of adoption screening and placement; coming “full-circle” to overcome the challenges of adoption to grow into parenthood. In the USA Foli (2010) interviewed 21 adoptive parents (mostly mothers) who had adopted their child between one and 24 years previously and also identified themselves as having been depressed at some point post-adoption. Foli found that these parents indicated they and others, including extended family members, often held unrealistic expectations of being a “super parent” and with problem-free hopes of family life that were not met in the reality of adoption. Foli’s findings from her retrospective study of adoptive parents were further corroborated by findings from separate focus group interviews held with adoptive parent support groups and adoption professionals in her overall grounded theory analyses.

Just as in the transition to biological parenthood couples adopting a child (or children) face new identity challenges as they take on new roles as a parent and expand their family system from a dyad to a triad or more to include consideration of their child or children (Goldberg, 2009). Partners may also struggle to offer support to each other as they are stretched by these new challenges. In addition to these factors facing all new parents in couple relationships, Goldberg argued that adoptive parents will likely encounter particular pressures: they will likely contact adoption agencies after much debate about whether to adopt, often after a lengthy process of realizing infertility, and they may have met with doubts or ignorance about adoption expressed by extended family members (and others), and further in the process of adopting they will have experienced much scrutiny by professionals. Goldberg also considered that additional challenges could be encountered by LGBT adopters or those who adopted a child of another racial or ethnic group. Thus, adoptive parents are confronted by unique stresses, conflicts and challenges that might be expected to further complicate the more universal developmental tasks and problems faced by other adults in their parenthood identity transition (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990).

Adoptive parents may also be challenged by the demands of parenting children, who may arrive in the adoptive family with particular difficulties that quickly confront the new parent's expectations. Ruston's (2003) review summarized three main sets of issues encountered by adoptive parents of children adopted from care: children's challenging emotional and behavioural problems; children's special educational needs; and establishing a close emotional relationship with a child who has previously not had a positive and supportive experience of family life.

Other researchers also have stressed that pre-adoption factors play a role in post-adoption adaptation and the possibility that a placement is disrupted (Selwyn et al. 2015). In the current study we therefore paid particular attention to how couples adopting a child spoke

about their own expectations of family and how they considered the pre-adoption lives of their soon to arrive children. Studies have focused on evaluating the effects on adopted children's well-being of pre-adoption experiences and also post-adoption contact arrangements with birth relatives but less attention paid to the impact these factors have on adoptive parenting (for a review see Triseliotis, 2011). Nevertheless, a retrospective qualitative UK study of 11 couples who had adopted a child between 1977 and 2001 found that the trend towards greater openness about adoption, together with the inclusion of birth relatives in direct or indirect contact arrangements, presented a complex task for adoptive parents in both establishing and retaining kinship ties (Jones & Hackett, 2011). Furthermore, a detailed study of five children's experience of moving from foster care into their adoptive parents' home indicated that this was of itself a difficult transition for all concerned (Boswell & Cudmore, 2014). Social workers, adoptive parents and foster carers all focused on the child making a fresh start with adoption rather than acknowledging the child's sense of foster care loss.

Statistics compiled by the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) from a survey of Local Authorities and Health Care Trusts across the UK have identified that around half of the children waiting for adoption are part of a sibling group, although they may never have lived together or have been housed separately while in foster care (BAAF press release, 2014). Boddy (2013) reported that many of the children waiting to be placed in sibling groups were older and brought with them more complicated pre-adoption histories than did single children. A series of studies of single children or children placed for adoption as part of a sibling group when aged between 5 to 11 years old and followed up over a period of six years found that 71% were still with their adoptive parents at follow-up (Rushton & Dance, 2004). In the majority of these cases the adoption was described as a positive experience by the adoptive parents questioned, although a minority of adoptive parents

reported either that the placement continued but was less happy, or recalled a previous point where the child or children placed had temporarily left the adoptive family, or reported that a placement had ended. Rushton and Dance also noted that the degree to which the adoptive parents expressed doubt about the placement's success at the one year follow-up was significantly associated with subsequent placement disruption, thus highlighting the importance of the settling in period for placement stability. Further, when children had difficulties settling with the adoptive family then reported levels of family stress, difficulties in forming relationships, and children's behavioural problems all correlated. About two-thirds of the adoptive parents with sibling placements reported family stresses, but in most cases not all the children placed were considered as difficult and in fact placements of a single child were more likely to end in disruption or continue to be reported as difficult at follow-up. We considered that adopting a sibling group could present a particular challenge to couples since the existing subsystem would be challenged to adapt not only to the needs of each child, but also to the inclusion of a pre-formed sibling sub-system.

Research Aim

The prospective qualitative study reported here examined the experience of becoming adoptive parents using interview data from six heterosexual married couples. Previous studies have focused either on retrospective data from adoptive parents, or tracked their progression through adoption services from application and assessment to the placement of a child. Our prospective study of the adoption process, which focused both on couples' expectations and their subsequent experience of family change, was designed to highlight the couple's transition to parenthood experience from news of placement through the first six months of adoptive family life when the challenge of adopting a child or children from the local authority care system was still fresh. Our study focused on how the couple's prior expectations concerning their existing family system were expanded to include their new

children and how that manifested six months after placement, thus highlighting issues occurring in the important settling in period post-placement. In particular we considered whether the experience of becoming adoptive parents to an individual child, or to a sibling group, challenged the couple in different ways.

Method

Research design

A qualitative short-term prospective study was designed employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Six heterosexual couples who were becoming first time parents were interviewed when couples were expecting the arrival of their children (pre-adoption) and followed-up six months after the children's arrival (post-adoption). Three couples were adopting a pair of siblings (Couples 1,2,3) and three couples were adopting a single child (Couples 4,5,6).

Participants

A prospective non-clinical sample of adoptive parents was recruited through social workers in an area adoption team in the middle of England. Social workers then advertised the study to eligible couples within their client base using the team's newsletter and display boards. Potential participants were given a telephone number to ring and further details of participation were discussed with the research team and written details mailed out. Each participant provided written consent prior to interview and audio-recording. The study was given ethical clearance after scrutiny by a University institutional review board, the area adoption team, and the appropriate NHS and Local Authority Research Governance Group.

The selection criteria employed in the study specified the recruitment of heterosexual couples adopting a child (or children) for the first time when neither of them had birth

children themselves. As leading IPA researchers have suggested (e.g. Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009), we aimed to recruit a relatively homogeneous sample of adoptive families, thus adoptions involving trans-racial placements, international adoptions, adoptions by single parents or parents identifying as LGBTQ, or those involving children with specific special needs were not included to limit sample variation due to these important factors. At the time of their first interview adoptive parents also had to have been told that they were to have a particular child (or children) placed with them, but not yet to have received the child(ren) into their home. Thus couples were seen at a time when the arrival of children was imminent, and expectations of adoption heightened, but their thoughts were as yet uninfluenced by their children's arrival.

At pre-adoption interviews participants were between 29-44 years old with a mean age of 37 years (mothers' mean age =36.5 years; fathers' mean age=38.5 years). All mothers-to-be and fathers-to-be were in full-time work prior to adoption. Two mothers-to-be and two fathers-to-be had left the education system at minimum school leaving age, two fathers-to-be had completed further educational qualifications and the remaining four mothers-to-be and two fathers-to-be had completed college degrees. All six couples were married prior to adoption and had been together between 6.5-16 years (mean length of time together 10.25 years). All couples and children were of white British ethnicity. Altogether couples adopted six boys and three girls ranging from infants under two years old to children aged over five years. Each of the three pairs of adopted siblings had been housed together both in their birth families and in foster care placements prior to being adopted by participants in our study.

Interviews

Basic demographic details were collected at the beginning of the study so sample parameters and contextual factors could be gauged. At the end of each of the pre-adoption interviews couples gave consent in principle for a follow-up interview 6 months post – placement and all were completed.

Each semi-structured couple interview took place in the couple's own home and took between one and two hours. The main questions asked at pre-adoption explored each couple's expectations and preparation for adoption, whether they planned to parent in the same way or differently compared to their own childhood experience, what they knew about the child(ren) they were adopting, and how they thought family life might change for each of them individually, as a couple, and with their extended family. Post-adoption interviews asked couples to describe their experience of adoption: whether it was as they expected or more or less challenging and how it had affected them as individuals, as a couple and within their extended family. Audio-recordings of all interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim. In the pseudonym attributed extracts presented below transcript quotes have been edited with ... to indicate missing extraneous information and [...] to indicate text edited for anonymity.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the principles of IPA (Smith et al., 2009). An idiographic priority is given in IPA, therefore, each pre-adoption interview transcript was analysed in full chronological interview order and all were analysed before the post-adoption interviews happened. This analysis schedule was repeated with the post-adoption interviews.

After several readings of a transcript, the initial coding aimed to capture the experiential claims, concerns, and understandings of each participant (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006). In particular we sought to retain the phrases, comparisons and metaphors that participants used in presenting their experiences consequently we prioritized “in vivo”

coding. In the next phase of coding, interpretations were suggested and emergent themes formed. Interpretations were then clustered together to give a draft table summarizing emergent themes for each couple at pre- and post-adoption. Initially all the transcripts were analysed by the second author, who had interviewed all the couples at both pre- and post-adoption waves. Then transcripts and analyses were reviewed and refined in discussion with the first author. The final rounds of analyses pooled together themes from across all pre-adoption interviews and post-adoption interviews respectively to form superordinate (summary) themes.

Three points of data quality control and thematic verification ensued in the final stages of analyses to subject themes to modifications reflecting minor clarifications. Firstly, one of the interviewed couples reviewed their own pre- and post-adoption transcripts and our analyses of their themes. Secondly, the same couple also reviewed the thematic summary of each couple's data and the draft report of findings across the entire follow-up study. Finally, the superordinate thematic summary and draft report were reviewed by two professionals unconnected with the project, both of whom were experienced IPA researchers (a psychologist in the adoption field and a systemic psychotherapist).

Findings

Pre-adoption analyses

At pre-adoption interviews four superordinate themes were identified from the transcripts (see Table 1). The first superordinate theme captured participants' hopes that adoption would bring an end to their endless wait for children, and help them to manage an abstract sense of loss of a birth child with whom they had expected to begin their family. All six couples talked about waiting: waiting for the expected birth child that never arrived, waiting through failed fertility treatments, and still more waiting through the lengthy

adoption process. As Mary (Couple 3) poignantly said: “We’ve waited ever since we got together” (P25, L30). There was a sense that adopting finally would resolve their disappointment and provide a resolution of what had gone before. Diane (Couple 1) hoped that adoption would: “Put a bit of foreclosure on all that had happened before ... once we had decided on adoption we felt happy to forget about IVF” (P5, L23).

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Thus, couples expressed a powerful desire to adopt, or perhaps even a sense of desperation. On the one hand, the desire to adopt was emphasized by the participants and was reiterated by the couple who helped with the audit. On the other hand, the research team and both of the auditing professionals additionally saw elements of desperation in participants’ accounts, as well as perhaps a feeling of resignation that the selection process was mainly in the hands of the adoption professionals rather than under their control. Simon (Couple 5) said: “We are quite prepared to accept any child”.

All six couples talked about making connections within their respective families (pre-adoption interview superordinate theme 2). Some couples already appeared to be identifying with the children they were adopting, even though their knowledge of the children was only based on reading profiles and seeing photos. Ian (Couple 3) said: “you could read something in [the profile] that was perhaps like myself ... or I could read something and be like that’s Mary that is” (P9, L19).

Part of making connections with their child seemed to be about feeling that the couple could make good the gaps in the child’s earlier life, perhaps linked into ideas of rescuing the child and repairing past damage. Participants all wanted to make a difference to the child they were going to adopt and make reparation for the often traumatic start their children had experienced: “We can offer love and stability to a child who hasn’t had that” (Louise Couple

4 P11, L20). Couples engaged in a process of reconciling the information they had received about their child's pre-adoption history with their desire to see their child settled smoothly into their home with prior difficulties swiftly overcome. Social workers seemed to have shared potentially negative information about the children with the couple, but the couple's capacity to absorb this appeared to be limited since they minimized the importance of the children's previous history. For instance, Roger (Couple 1) reported that the early neglect the children had experienced was "nothing specific, just general neglect" (P3, L17).

Connections were already being made between the child(ren) and the couple's extended family, as Mary (Couple 3) summed up: "Everyone's making connections as they do ... that shows ownership and acceptance and they are seen as part of the family ... everyone's really excited" (P10, 24). Participants did not mention any instances of extended family members expressing ambivalence about the children's arrival. Perhaps any reservations would have been difficult to voice at this exciting time for the whole family. Nonetheless, some couples commented that an extended family member seemed not to understand why a particular child might have been placed for adoption. For instance, Anne said to Simon: "Your dad found it hard to understand ... it was difficult for him to understand how neglect can affect [the children]" (Couple 5 P16, L17).

Couples also invoked intergenerational family scripts (Byng-Hall, 1995a) in describing how they planned to parent their children. For example, three of the couples sought to replicate gendered scripts practised by their family of origin around "the nurturing stay at home mum": "We had our mums there at home; always there when we came home from school, which we feel is important" (Mark Couple 4 P9, L25). The importance of an available or stay at home parent for a needy child also may have been emphasized by adoption professionals, although professional influence on this point was not evident in the interview transcripts. A corrective intergenerational family script that surfaced in the

dialogues of three of the couples concerned the unsuitability of physical chastisement, which their own parents had used on them: “Obviously social services insist there is no smacking and we got smacked as children, so we wouldn’t do that. I would do that differently, but you can’t anyway when you’re adopting” (Anne Couple 5 P13, L26).

Alongside making connections, a process of breaking connections also seemed to be taking place for couples (pre-adoption interview superordinate theme 3). Two of the couples said that they might need to correct powerful intergenerational family scripts that adopted children might bring with them from their birth families: “My worry for Chantelle is that we break the cycle that happened to her mum, and possibly her mum before her” (Mary Couple 3 P5, L9). Couples also had thought hard about why birth parents were giving their child up for adoption and it was probably easier to fathom why when the child had been previously abused or neglected. Two couples were particularly critical of the child(ren’s) birth parents and this seemed to provide an acceptable rationale both for adoption and the children’s need to break connections with their birth parents. For example, Roger (Couple 1) described the children’s birth parents as having “no boundaries at all” (P3, L23). Couples also similarly described the need to rescue children from unsatisfactory foster care. Roger followed up his criticism of the children’s birth parents by also describing the foster carers’ lack of boundaries: “there are older kids in the [foster carer’s home], well one of them walked in while we were there and swore” (P15, L9).

A fourth superordinate theme evident in the pre-adoption interview transcripts was that prospective adoptive parents appeared to be in a state of “unsafe uncertainty” (Mason, 1993) as they anticipated their child(ren)’s arrival. Mason has defined unsafe uncertainty as when family members in systemic psychotherapy express fearful reservations about the present and the future, not knowing what will happen or what courses of action would be safe and secure. Unsafe uncertainty about adoption decisions emerged during the course of the

interview in five cases: either there was uncertainty about the adoption decisions that had been made, or one (or both) parents-to-be expressed concerns about how they would manage to parent the children. For example, Louise (Couple 4) described their imminent parenthood as: “quite scary as well, you don’t know if you’ll do it right, if all will be OK” (P11, L41). Roger (Couple 1) summed up an impending sense of responsibility: “all this huge responsibility of looking after two boys who are going to be a bit wild” (P26, L6). Even the very practical decisions the parents-to-be had to make could seem like a risky leap into the unknown, such as which beds to buy for the children (deliberated by Couple 3). Competition with other prospective adoptive parents for the “limited supply” of children to adopt seemed to add to a sense of unsafe uncertainty in three of the six interviews. Anne (Couple 5) said “it felt like a sort of competition, who would get the best one” when she described the profiling evenings (P18, L25). Couples also appeared anxiously keen to Hoover up any information they could glean about parenting from social workers, foster carers, extended family members, friends who already had children, and other adopters. For example, although Susan and Tony (Couple 2) questioned the competence of the foster carers their soon-to-be adopted children had been placed with, they also mentioned having learnt the most from these foster carers.

Lastly in relation the superordinate theme of unsafe uncertainty, all six couples mentioned concerns about the potential of children to threaten their relationship. Ian (Couple 3) said: “what we hope is that it will bring us even closer together but you know we’ve got an unknown quantity coming in so it could go from one extreme to the other. It could be the worst thing that’s ever happened to us” (P18, L21). Couples talked about the impact of a child on their lives and emphasized that they were becoming parents later than expected. Couples felt they would lose their sense of spontaneity, as Susan (Couple 2) said: “When there are just two of you, you get to be very selfish” (P8, L13). In contrast to concerns about

adoption affecting their couple relationship, personal identity concerns were less prominent (only two mothers-to-be mentioned concerns related to their careers).

Post-placement analyses

Three superordinate themes emerged from the analyses of the post-adoption interviews: fulfilment in adoption, the stress of family script collision, and continued unsafe uncertainty (Table 2). Notwithstanding the mixture of positive and negative themes running through the post-adoption interviews, a sense of fulfilment in adoption pervaded all the transcripts (post-adoption interview superordinate theme 1). Couples felt they were making a difference to their children and clearly enjoyed seeing them grow and develop. Ian (Couple 3) described their children as “unrecognisable from the children who came here” (P3, L31). And throughout the interviews all six couples claimed the children as their own both directly “they felt like ours straightaway” (Mary, Couple 3, P5, L31) and indirectly “They seem to pick up our mannerisms” (Mary, P10, L1). Four of the six couples said that the adoption transition was easier than they had expected: “He seemed to settle in really quickly, well seemed to, it wasn’t until he had been here 3 months we noticed he seemed much better, started calling us Mummy and Daddy. It all went really smooth.” (Louise Couple 4 P1, L7).

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Three of the four couples who had found adoption easier than anticipated had adopted only one child. Couples who had adopted one child conveyed a real sense of joy in their children; they vividly described their first meeting with their child and continued discussing their child with the same awestruck wonder: “it was just wow!” (Louise Couple 4 P2, L15). These couples also had adopted the youngest children in the sample and seemed to have developed a preoccupation with their parent- child relationships. For instance, Louise (Couple 4) described how she and Mark “sometimes on a weekend we sit and watch TV but

in reality we are watching him, I just well up in tears often, don't I?" (P7, L34). Nevertheless, for those who had adopted only one child the thought remained that they may not yet be a 'complete' family as they considered the advantages and disadvantages of adopting another child.

The post-adoption stories of couples who had adopted two children contained glimpses of fulfilment, but their stories conveyed an overwhelming sense of the couple being extremely busy and this may have obscured some of their joy in their children. Of the couples adopting siblings only Mary (Couple 3) spontaneously said: "I love it, find it really rewarding, you day is full, your life is full" (P4, L31).

The second superordinate theme concerned various stressful collisions between different family scripts. A key part of the stress expressed in three of the couple interviews was in not feeling confident that they had a parenting script that they could cope with their children or do their best for them. Susan (Couple 2) said they were: "worrying about them worrying, so not only are we worrying about what they are worrying about, but worrying about worrying!" (P7, L8). Of the couples adopting a single child only one briefly mentioned not knowing what to do next in coping with their daughter who had some developmental difficulties: "We just felt helpless, we just wanted to help her. We couldn't make her happy." (Anne Couple 5 P6, L34).

All three couples adopting sibling pairs seemed to be contending with the stress of colliding with their children's pre-existing family scripts. Powerful adopted sibling dynamics enacted family scripts that varied in their particular content and these clashed with the couples' own script expectations of a sharing and caring family. Couples who had adopted siblings said that their children were sometimes fiercely competitive for parental affection or even food. For instance, Diane (Couple 1) described her eldest son as obsessively worrying

about fairness: “We had to measure drinks, he’d measure it, and he’d count broccoli” (P10, L11). In other cases the sibling pair excluded their adoptive parents as they focused on their own needs or on each other’s needs with the older child sometimes looking after the younger child. For example, Mary (Couple 3) said: “the most stressful thing for me is if they are sick in the night, they haven’t called for us and have sorted themselves out” (P6, L25).

Stressful script collision also was evident in the challenge that participants felt new parenthood issued to each of them as a person and to their established couple subsystem. The children evoked unexpected powerful emotions in these new parents. For example, Tony (Couple 2) expressed his shock at the strength of his feelings: “They make you angrier than you would ever expect you could be angry at times” (P.10, L39). Individual differences in parenting style were noticed particularly by couples adopting siblings. Diane (Couple 1) said “we didn’t expect it but I think Roger is too tough and I’m too soft at times” (P16, L43). Couples described the children as strengthening their couple relationship and challenging it at times. Four of the six couples felt the arrival of children had strengthened their relationship in many ways and four couples also felt that the children’s arrival had challenged them. For example, Couple 1 expressed a mixture of positive and negative feelings. Roger said “When we put our minds to something that sort of pulls us together” (P17, L19). Yet when Diane encountered open hostility from the children they had adopted Diane worried that: “Roger would think it’s just me and how I deal with them” (P19, L33) despite Roger’s reassurance: “I feel for her ... it’s awful knowing he’s kicking and spitting at her” (P20, L31).

Another aspect of the superordinate theme of stressful family script collision was the challenge couples felt in connecting their new children into the extended family system. Unexpected tensions with some extended family members were detailed in three post-adoption interviews. For one couple keeping the extended family at a distance immediately after placement seemed to have led to the extended family feeling excluded: “We didn’t

isolate ourselves but we wanted to get it right first, give [the children] a chance to settle, and the wider family struggled with that a bit” (Diane Couple 1 P17, L36). In other families both the new parents and their extended family members seemed unprepared for the children’s behaviour and were upset by their differing reactions to the children. Susan (Couple 2) said: “Me and my mum had one run in ... I’d been a little hard, I gave him [her son] a punishment and she revoked it in front of me ... so I kind of had to walk out to the garden... and she came out and started crying.” (P14, L21). Nevertheless, four of the six couples described at least some positive connections forged between the new adoptive family unit and their wider family system: “[they] treat [the children] on every level as if they were our own” (Ian Couple 3 P11, L7).

As in pre-adoptive interviews, continued concerns around the super-ordinate theme of unsafe uncertainty were manifest in post-adoption interviews but in new ways. Perhaps the continued feelings of unsafe uncertainty were rooted in the unspoken reality that a child could be removed at any time, after all these children had indeed been placed from the statutory care system. Nevertheless, post-placement couples did not mention fears of the children being removed back into the care system but instead focused their interviews on how unprepared they felt for the task of parenting. For example, Roger (Couple 1) reflected on the day they received their children: “There’s no preparation for what you are taking on ... we just wanted time to stop still didn’t we?” (P21, L24). Related to the theme of feeling unprepared was the continued questioning and anxiety couples revealed about their ability to parent the children they had adopted. Some talked about practical details such as: “Driving with them back in the car thinking what do we do with them? Where shall we take them? ... [But] when you are a parent you know where the parks are” (Mary Couple 3 P11, L50). Others felt that their novice status as new parents was visible to others: “You’re conscious what people think when you take them out” (Rodger Couple 1 P16, L47). In three of the transcripts couples indicated that

their children also had experienced a continued sense of uncertainty about the adoption; for example Mary (Couple 3) said that her children: “had their birthdays and Christmas and thought that was it, they would only be having one with us and we said “no, you are here now, forever” (P2, L26). Couples adopting siblings also hinted at, or directly mentioned, fearing failure: “what if it doesn’t work out?” (Diane, Couple 1, P17, L.30). There was even an honest acknowledgement of having wanted to give the children back, as Mary (Couple 3) said albeit in a light-hearted way: “We did have a few times when they were vile to each other, in the first few weeks it was really testing, I could have happily given them back” (P6, L34).

In contrast to the continued sense of unsafe uncertainty expressed by couples adopting a pair of siblings, unsafe uncertainty seemed not to mark post-adoption interviews with couples who had adopted single children. Couples with just one child conveyed a reassured sense of confidence in being able to know what to do by being able to read their children’s needs and moods. For example, Claire (Couple 6) described attuning to her son’s needs “[He’s] being a bit clingy to me at the moment, it’s difficult to describe ... I can just tell how he feels” (P2, L30).

Discussion

The transition to adoptive parenthood for heterosexual couples was explored prospectively in our study of six self-selected white heterosexual couples as they adopted a child, or a pair of siblings, from the statutory care system in the UK. On the one hand, our IPA study highlighted themes from couples’ pre-adoption interviews that disappeared from their post-adoption narratives six months later, e.g. concerns about coming to parenthood later than expected. Further, a new feeling of contented fulfilment in parenthood was evident to some extent in all post-adoption interviews. New parents conveyed that they were doing their utmost for the children they had long desired. Thus, couples seemed to embrace the generally

positive picture of adjustment to new parenthood depicted in prior quantitative research on adoptive parents (Ceballo et al., 2004; Levy-Shiff et al., 1990; McKay et al., 2010).

On the other hand, the present study indicated that some of the underlying meanings for couples of pre-adoption themes had particular implications post-adoption. Firstly, the largely unanticipated collision of different family scripts sometimes felt overwhelmingly stressful post-adoption, yet pre-adoption couples had only thought of making new family connections and breaking old patterns. Secondly, prior to adoption couples appeared to experience adoption as a journey into a new family terrain of unsafe uncertainty and for some couples continued feelings of unsafe uncertainty pervaded their follow-up interviews six months post-adoption placement. Our findings indicated that couples adopting older sibling pairs appeared to face a greater challenge to their couple sub-system in the adoption transition than did couples accommodating to the placement of a single younger child. Nevertheless, these conclusions would necessarily need confirmation from a larger more rigorous quantitative study.

The concept of 'unsafe uncertainty' (Mason, 1993) was helpful in looking at the couples' experiences both prior to their children coming and after their children had arrived. For our interviewees, all of whom had been unable to conceive birth children, there was a sense that even prior to embarking on the demanding process of becoming adoptive parents they had long been in a position of 'unsafe uncertainty' in regard to the much desired possibility of parenthood. This 'unsafe uncertainty' seemed to be exacerbated by aspects of the adoption process: Would they be approved? Would the adoption panel approve the match with a particular child? And what would the children be like? The emotional impact of unsafe uncertainty seemed to be heightened in the pre-adoption process when couples relayed 'horror stories' of profiling meetings, as Dance & Farmer (2014) also have indicated. This suggests that it is important for adoption practitioners to look further into how adopters can

be helped to achieve a sense of confidence in their capacity to parent prior to having children with significant needs placed with them.

Our prospective study and IPA approach indicated that the implications of the children's histories prior to adoption had been only partly thought through by some new parents, who were then shocked by their adopted child's thoughts or behaviour. According to the couples interviewed eight of the nine children in our sample had experienced previous abuse and/or neglect, thus children's earlier experiences of family life may have led them to hold intensely negative scripts concerning parental intentions and motives. Lindsey and Barrett (2006) have described ways in which concepts such as mother and father, daughter and son were changed by the experience of abuse and neglect. But post-placement couples appeared to be caught unprepared for their children's, attributions and emotions, without seeming to realise the variety of ways in which children may have adapted to maltreatment or the physical or psychological unavailability of a birth parent or attachment figure. In the post-placement interviews adoptive couples mainly focused on how to make their child or children happy in their new family. Our results here deserve further specific research attention as our study did not specifically investigate the information given in pre-placement adoption preparation sessions and how this influenced post-placement adjustment. Nonetheless, our findings did suggest that couples did not fully appreciate the implications of pre-placement information given by adoption professionals, indicating that this needs further consideration within adoption preparation sessions and additional consideration post-placement.

Prior to adoption some couples did recognize that their soon-to-be arriving child(ren) might have different family scripts to their own, but a key aspect of the pre-adoption super-ordinate theme breaking connections was the belief that after placement their child would make a fresh start and leave these patterns behind (see also Boswell & Cudmore, 2014). Six months after placement new parents sometimes seemed to expect that they would or perhaps

should know what to do to help their adopted child feel happy and secure, yet this clearly may take a longer period of time. Additionally, there was a sense that the strategies that parents-to-be sometimes employed pre-adoption to manage their level of unsafe uncertainty had not helped them appreciate the challenges their children would present (e.g. minimizing the implications of previous neglect).

Some couples felt they lacked support from their family of origin as they struggled with new parenthood. Out of a concern to see their children settle in to their new home, and perhaps linked to a desire to establish their own authority as new parents, some couples found it difficult to realise the post-adoption connections with their own family of origin they had anticipated prior to the children's arrival. Moreover, inter-generational differences in approach to parenting, or difficulties in understanding the needs of adopted children, may have exacerbated this. Some adoption services already provide additional workshops for extended family members to attend to help families understand the needs of children who have been in the local authority care system.

In our sample family script collision and continued feelings of unsafe uncertainty post-adoption seemed to be paramount in the time two interviews of couples who had adopted a pair of siblings. Perhaps the anxiety of being placed in a new family may have perhaps prompted adopted siblings to seek some certainty in their relationship with each other and in their joint established script of prior family life. Thus, siblings may have been more resistant to the overtures of their new adoptive parents than were single adopted children. Nevertheless, since it was beyond the scope of our qualitative investigation, we were unable to make assessments of other factors, such as each child's attachment behaviours or each parent's capacity for understanding mental states, which might have meant that these parents struggled more than did others in the sample (see Fonagy, Steele, Steele, Moran and Higgitt, 1991). In the families we studied the adopted sibling pairs also included all the older

children in our sample. Consequently, the age of the children and their singleton-sibling adoption status were confounded in our analyses and a further study would be necessary to explore the independent contribution of each of these factors. It is also conceivable that family script collision and the continued sense of 'unsafe uncertainty' would resolve in time for couples who had adopted siblings as it had at six months post-adoption for couples adopting who had just one child. Again only a further longer-term follow-up study could effectively determine this.

Clinical and Adoption Service Implications: a new framework for professional practice

Specialist clinical training for professionals working in adoption services has been widely advocated (Grotevant & McDermott, 2014) and integrative practice can broaden the services that can be offered to families and a multi-disciplinary collaborative approach to formulation can enhance our understanding of adoptive families (Dallos & Vetere, 2010). In reviewing the findings of our study it was clear that the transition to an adoptive family presented family members with a complex interplay of internal and external processes. Thus, the transition to adoptive parenthood reminded us of the value of integrating systemic and psychoanalytic theoretical frameworks in applying our findings to practice.

Our pre-adoption findings indicated that couples adopting children held strong internal representations of their own family of origin experiences and sensed their extended family's expectations, and perhaps held a fantasized image of a long awaited untroubled child. We suggest that the couple's expectations then clashed post-adoption with the looked after child's often disturbed internal representation of family (Brinich, 1980, 1990; Cairns, 2008). The external world influences of adoptive parents and their children may also clash as both parties bring with them their own family histories influenced by the 'social Graces' (Divac and Heaphy, 2005).

Findings from our study suggest that during the transition to adoptive parenting professionals working with these families need to support a move from feelings of unsafe uncertainty to feelings of safe enough uncertainty; a therapeutic process that Mason has detailed (Hardham, 2006; Mason, 1993). From a secure position of safe enough uncertainty family members can then improvise new patterns of family interactions and create a shared new adoptive family script as described by Byng-Hall (1995a&b). We recognize that adoption professionals also may be troubled by concerns about unsafe uncertainty as they work with potential adopters and follow the progress of children placed from the care system, thus this framework may also be helpful for these professionals. We suggest the following agenda to assist professionals in empowering families pre- and post-adoption to move on from thoughts of unsafe uncertainty: Internal and external world influences on family members, Intergenerational issues, Family scripts, and the Structural challenges of adoption (IIFS). We do not propose the IIFS agenda as a formula for adoption practice, instead we offer it as a useful acronym to help professionals and families keep in mind the multiple, dynamic processes entailed in adoption.

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Table 1. Summary of pre-adoption IPA themes.

Superordinate Themes	Themes
End to endless waiting and a new beginning	Waiting for children Resolution of infertility and managing loss of an expected child Adoption desire or desperation?
Making connections	Identifying with child Making good the gaps and minimizing problems Connecting with extended family replicating/correcting patterns
Breaking connections	Correcting adoptive child's birth family scripts, criticizing birth parents Criticizing foster carers
Adoption as "unsafe uncertainty"	Uncertainty regarding own decisions and responsibility Emotional uncertainty of adoption process Hoovering up information from others Unknown impact to couple relationship of late parenthood

Table 2. Summary of post-placement IPA Themes.

Superordinate Themes	Themes
Fulfilment in adoption	Making a difference Claiming the children as their own Adoption was easier than expected Parental joy in the child Sense of fulfilment but not yet a complete family
Stressful family script collision	Inadequate parenting script -- not knowing how to do the best for the children Colliding with powerful sibling subsystem dynamics Emotions evoked in the parents by their children Couple differences in parenting Unexpected tensions within the extended family
Continued “unsafe uncertainty” versus confidence	Unprepared novice parents Children’s sense of uncertainty Fearing failure